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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

The Strange Case of Mrs. Gerould¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

Mrs. Gerould as an essayist has had the imperial distinction of being crowned by Professor Brander Matthews as a womanly woman, in the same week that she was hailed by an editorial in the excellent and indispensable *Tribune* as obstinately maidenly. To the mind of Professor Matthews, the distinguished author of *Modes and Morals* is "both feminine and womanly" (an encomiastic subtlety which will hardly escape Mrs. Gerould, since, says Professor Matthews, she is "not in the least advanced"). For the *Tribune*, she is still unsnatched from spinsterhood: this eminent matron of letters remains "Miss" Gerould. It is a delicate tribute, especially when conjoined with Professor Matthews' further praise of the author as one who "speaks in the low and soft voice,"—which, he says in his esoterically allusive way, "is an excellent thing in woman." One hopes that Mrs. Gerould, who may perhaps have read the essays of Alice Meynell, did not feel shy when she found herself welcomed by Professor Matthews as, by implication, one who casts a new radiance upon literature, which "has been embellished by very few women essayists, and by none of the first rank."

Mrs. Gerould is not only soft-voiced and womanly, but "she writes like a woman." We suspect that Mrs. Gerould will wear this particular flower very close to her heart, especially as Professor Matthews' gesture in proffering it is so charmingly vague. What, you wonder, does it mean—to "write like a woman"? Does it mean to write like Alice Meynell or like Elinor Glyn? Like May Sinclair or like

¹ *Modes and Morals*, by Katharine Fullerton Gerould. New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1920.

Mrs. Humphry Ward? Like Rebecca West or like Louisa M. Alcott? Like Jane Addams or like Amy Lowell? "When we call the roll of the glorious company of writers of our language who have enriched our literature with a constant succession of delightful essays . . ." What is the sex of that prose? No—you are wrong: it is male. It is the prose of Professor Matthews. What is the sex of this?—"So long as democracy is simply a political matter, culture is left free to select its groups and proclaim its hierarchies." Oddly enough, that is the prose of Mrs. Gerould. But has she written here "like a woman"? Who would dare to say, except Professor Matthews?

We have been fascinated by Professor Matthews' critical distillation of Mrs. Gerould, because we like to imagine Mrs. Gerould's own satisfaction in savoring it. We like to think of her pleasure in viewing herself as an essayist preëminently soft-voiced and womanly. Perhaps she conceives herself as a somewhat different kind of literary mammal. But it is of the essence of Mrs. Gerould's strange case that in *Modes and Morals* she quite obviously is being faithful to a conception of herself which, so far as it concerns these essays, is purely legendary. Professor Matthews is no more amusing in his objective view of her than she is in her subjective fondling of her own legend.

The Mrs. Gerould of legend is a figure of marked intellectual distinction, a shrewd ironist, a spiritual aristocrat, an astringently comedic philosopher, undeflected by the facile and the *clichée*. The astonishing truth is that the figure which emerges from these pages is that of an unsuspecting victim of mass cerebration, a remarkably perfect specimen of the herd mind functioning without self-consciousness or restraint. Professor Matthews is edified by the "cosmopolitanism" of a culture which has achieved both Paris and Honolulu. If he were capable of it, he should have been depressed by the thronging evidences of an outlook triumphantly parochial. One salutes the Mrs. Gerould of the short stories as a fictional artist of subtle power and distinguished skill. One views her secondary personality, the social philosopher, the student of manners and morals, as an example of the perturbing truth that a mind which creates with brilliancy and force may be feeble and unrewarding in ratiocination.

Mrs. Gerould writes of "The Boundaries of Truth,"

of "The Extirpation of Culture," of "The Newest Woman," of "Tabu and Temperament," of "British Novelists, Ltd.," of "The Remarkable Rightness of Rudyard Kipling"; and of other aspects of the social panorama. To all of these subjects she brings only the apparatus of the tribal mind. Her emotional repercussions, her preferences and animosities, her ethical criteria, are admirable exemplifications of herd psychology. She displays all its characteristics: its obscurantism, its uniformity, its ferocious contempt for the experimental, its suspicion of all that goes beyond the tribal sanctions, its measureless self-satisfaction; its hard intolerance and cruelty, its smugness, its incurable sentimentalism.

Of these unmistakable stigmata, Mrs. Gerould affords a bewildering multiplicity of examples. Take her scorn for the modern hero of fiction—"the Humanitarian Hero—someone who has particular respect for convicts and for fallen women, and whose favorite author is Tolstoi. He must qualify for the possession of her hand by long, voluntary residence in the slums . . . He must never order 'pistols and coffee'—his only permitted weapon is benevolent legislation"—a contemptible type indeed! And "the feminine young" of today: these extraordinary creatures actually indulge in "scientific talk about sex." "Before a young woman suspects that she wants to marry a young man, she has probably discussed with him, exhaustively, the penal code, white slavery, eugenics, and race suicide. The miracle is that she should want, in these circumstances, to marry him at all. She probably does not, unless his views have been wholly to her satisfaction." Does Mrs. Gerould long for that blessed past of affectionate memory when the young woman married him in romantic ignorance and, perhaps, bore him syphilitic children? *Must* the bourbon mind simulate unintelligence?

Consider, as an example of something that baffles characterization, these further reflections (from "Fashions in Men"):

"It is well that we take thought for the lower strata of humanity . . . *It is right to think of the poor.*"

"The [modern] hero . . . is always passionately on the side of the people whom laws were devised to protect the respectable from."

"The public at present loves as a sister the woman with

a past." Modern nonsense, to be sure—yet it was a long time ago that Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders: "The publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you." Into the Kingdom of God—yes, perhaps; but not into the kingdom of the suburban heart without a protest from Mrs. Gerould.

As Mrs. Gerould cannot face with equanimity the thought that respectable young women should discuss penology and eugenics with men, so she is annoyed with Science, because Science "insists on reducing all emotions . . . to a question of nerve-centers." Science, indeed, is one of the Criminal Classes—one of the gang of gunmen who are trying to assassinate Culture (a word which Mrs. Gerould seems to think is equivalent in meaning to the German word that is spelled with an initial K).

Mrs. Gerould is trite and trivial not only whenever her subject gives her an opportunity to be, but at moments when she might easily be something else. She cannot, for instance, say anything more discerning and valuable about Galsworthy's noble tragedy, *Justice*, than that "Mr. Galsworthy will never think anything out. He inveighs against solitary confinement, which is a good thing to do; but he does not offer any substitute solution, which would be an even better thing to do." You wonder what Mrs. Gerould might say of Hardy's *Tess* . . . "Mr. Hardy exhibits the unfortunate results of man's inhumanity to woman, and the cruel callousness of God. But he proposes no remedy for these things. Mr. Hardy will never think anything out."

Mrs. Gerould's phobias are enlightening. Here is a partial list of them:

The "democratic fallacy" and
 Thomas Jefferson ("that inspired charlatan")
 The Younger British Novelists.
 Intellectual *révoltés*
 Science
 The lower classes
 Humanitarians
 The modern young woman
 " " " man
 Rousseau

People who discuss sex
“ “ “ penology
Labor
Social equality
People who work in the slums
Unconventional people

But the most surprising feature of this altogether surprising book is the naïve and banal quality of the writing. To find Mrs. Gerould naïve and banal is almost as startling as it would be to find Mr. H. G. Wells Mid-Victorian or the *Times* furtively bolshevistic. Yet what is one to think of a style that solemnly proffers such observations as this?—"The child, I have been given to understand, is the father of the man" [p. 153]; and: "It is easier to destroy than to build up" [p. 162]; and: "The bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" [p. 92]; and: "Ours is a commercial age" [p. 90]; and: "It is of the essence of human nature to long for the unattainable" [p. 145]. When she is not swimming placidly upon the bosom of this unruffled sea of platitudes, Mrs. Gerould is patrolling the Atlantic coast glaring at Young England and shaking her fist at some defenceless character in a novel by Arnold Bennett or Compton Mackenzie or J. D. Beresford;—like Zola in Mr. Dooley's version of the Dreyfus trial, she stands in the doorway shouting "Jackuse!" whenever it is intimated that sex is an anatomical reality, or that the poor are unhappy, or that the world of yesterday is dead.

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